

Jerry Green: The following oral history interview is conducted by Jerry Green and Karen Byrne for the National Park Service, USS Arizona Memorial at Ala Moana Hotel, Honolulu on December 6, 2001, at 8:45 p.m. The person being interviewed is Frank Belisle, who was a fireman first class on the USS Maryland on December 7th, 1941. For the record, Frank, would you please state your full name, place of birth and birth date.

Frank Belisle: Frank Belisle. I was born July 21, 1920. And you want the place of birth?

Jerry Green: Yes.

Frank Belisle: Bondsville, Massachusetts.

Jerry Green: What did you consider your home town to be in 1941?

Frank Belisle: Bondsville, Massachusetts.

Jerry Green: And what were your parents' names?

Frank Belisle: Uh.. David and Catherine Belisle.

Jerry Green: How many brothers and sister did or do you have?

Frank Belisle: I had four brothers and four sisters.

Jerry Green: Where did you go to high school?

Frank Belisle: I went to high school in Palmer, Massachusetts.

Jerry Green: Where did you enlist?

Frank Belisle: In Springfield, Mass.

Jerry Green: And, Frank, why did you enlist?

Frank Belisle: At that time, there was no work. That was during the depression, the end of the depression and there was no work anywhere. As a matter of fact, I was in the CCC camps, the Civilian Conservation Camp for a dollar a day at them times and, when I got out of there, I went down to see if I could join the navy and I passed the test and I signed up for six years at that time.

Jerry Green: I'm curious, did any of your CCC training carry over to your navy training?

Frank Belisle: Well, it was much different but the CCC training was good because you had- you lived in a barracks and it was- was like uh... I'd say more on a army style. You had khakis and you had inspections and you lined up every morning and it was- was that sort of thing. And they took you to work out in the forts all the time.

Jerry Green: Any other information about your military background before coming to Hawaii?

Frank Belisle: No. That was it. I had a brother that was in the navy before me. And he was on the USS Portland years ago.

Jerry Green: What circumstances brought you to Hawaii?

Frank Belisle: The uh... when I- when I went aboard ship, was in Bremerton Navy Yard and, when we come out of the navy yard, we- the ship came straight here to uh.. Pearl Harbor.

Jerry Green: And that ship was?

Frank Belisle: The USS Maryland, a battle ship.

Jerry Green: When did you get here?

Frank Belisle: Oh, I would probably say in July of '41, right around that area.

Jerry Green: Can you tell us something about your duties here prior to December 7th?

Frank Belisle: Well, I was in the uh... first of all, I went to Henry Ford School in Dearborn, Michigan, to become an- a machinist mate. And, after-- I think it was about three months or so. Then I get shipped to Great Lakes and, from Great Lakes out to the Maryland. And, from the Maryland, I- I stayed on it 'til over five years. I put it out of commission, actually.

Jerry Green: Can you give me some sense of what your daily activity consisted of?

Frank Belisle: Well, uh... when I- when I come aboard ship, I got- I got sent- assigned to the boiler room, B division, and the ship had eight- eight boilers and each boiler, boiler room had their own crew. And our duty was always not only firing the boilers but to keep the boiler tip top shape and so many hours that the boiler steamed, it had to be cleaned and inspected and everything ship shape all the time and we had to keep that up all the time. But other- other than that, that was most of our working day. If we weren't- if we weren't on watch, we were in the boiler room cleaning up and making sure everything was up, uh... shipshape.

<crew talk>

Jerry Green: Frank, where were you assigned on December 7th, 1941?

Frank Belisle: At that day, I had the 8 to 12 watch in the boiler room, boiler room number two, and I go down to the boiler room at 7:45 'cause you always relieved the watch 15 minutes early. And I was down there in the boiler room when it all started.

Jerry Green: Why don't you tell us about your day in detail from the beginning?

Frank Belisle: Okay. When it- when it all started, we didn't know-- actually, you're down in the boiler room, you didn't know what was going on but we heard all the- the banging and everything else. And finally we got word from up on the bridge that it was an attack, Japanese attack. So we- we were down the boiler room, there- there's three men on watch all the time and we had to keep that boiler in- in enough steam. We were lucky enough that our anti-aircraft guns were in shape where they were firing so we had to keep steam pressure up all the time and- and we'd have to work quite a bit. But, as the attack went along, what we didn't know, we knew, found out later, but the boiler room started filling up with smoke. And so- got so thick in the boiler room that we could hardly see the gauges and we had to go to right near- up near the gauges to make sure we had enough steam pressure and oil pressure and everything else. So we reported it to boiler control. So they says, "Okay" and, a little later, they opened up a hatch and threw us down three gas masks and says, "Here, put these on." We didn't know-- that scared us because we didn't know what it was. But, later on, we found out it was the smoke from the Arizona and the West Virginia and it was blowing there, it was comin' down the stack, fillin' up the boiler room. And we were stuck down there for, oh, I would say probably about eight or nine hours before we got out. And then they- they opened up the hatch later on and threw us down a can of Spam and a loaf of bread. <laughs> But that was okay. Was- was like havin' a steak at that time because all the boiler rooms have their own uh.. own hot plate and coffee. You have coffee there all while you're on watch and everything else so at least we got fed or it wasn't that bad. But when we finally- when we finally got out and- and got to uh.. go up topside to see what was- what happened, it was just about dark. And none of us could believe what- what was goin' on then, what we saw at that time. And, when the Oklahoma went over, it- it pushed stuff- us up against the key and we couldn't move. We thought we were way out to sea but we hadn't moved an inch.

Jerry Green: What were some of the things that you saw when you came up?

Frank Belisle: Oh, we saw the Arizona was still burning and smoking. The West Virginia was just about- just about sunk. They were smokin' and uh... a lot of oil in the water. But, by the time we got up, most of the guys that were in the water were picked up and they got most of them. But uh... other- other than that, and the California was hit. But, see, we couldn't get off the ship anyway so we- we couldn't go out and see what was goin' on, that the rest of 'em that were, like, the Cassin and Downes - Downes that were- that were- were in the dry dock and they really were splattered.

Jerry Green: That was dark by the time you came up?

Frank Belisle: Yeah, yeah. Mm hm.

Jerry Green: How many were down there with you in the boiler room?

Frank Belisle: Three. There's three of us on watch every watch.

Jerry Green: And did you guys wear those gas masks for most of the time you were down there?

Frank Belisle: Well, we- we wore 'em for awhile and then they- they finally informed us it was smoke comin' down so we took 'em off and- and uh... see, the ship was so old, the boiler rooms were under air pre- under air pressure and you had to go through an air locker chamber to get into the boiler room. And uh.. later, the newer ships they bought, they had air incased boilers. They had a casing on the boiler where-- and we- we-- the new ships, you could have an open boiler room but ours, you couldn't because if you opened both air locker doors before you come in, you'd have a flare bo- flare back and the fire would jump outta the boiler about that far. So we always had to have air- air pressure in the boiler room all the time. We had a forced draft blower that we- we used to keep but that- that was only one spot where you could get a little breeze.

Jerry Green: Frank, what do you remember about that night?

Frank Belisle: Well, that night, I don't think too many guys slept that night but as soon- as soon as it was dark, darkness, everything was a blackout. You couldn't go up topside with a cigarette or no lights or- or-- there was no lights anywhere. And even- even if you were- even if you were up topside to do a job, you couldn't turn on any lights or anything else because then the- actually, the whole island was blacked out from then on at six o'clock every evening, it was- it was a blackout on the whole island. And- and then even- even after it was completed, we- when we did get liberty, we had to be back to the ship before six because the whole island was blacked out and all the ships were blacked out there.

Karen Byrne: Before we move on, is there anything else you want to tell us about that day or the next couple of days?

Frank Belisle: Oh, I think it was about uh... I would say roughly probably a week because we couldn't move 'cause we were up against the key 'cause the Oklahoma pushed us up against the key and uh... they had to dredge a little in front of us and pull us out so we could get out and when we went- when we did finally get out, we went up to Bremerton 'cause we got hit by two bombs and that was straight and we went to Bremerton and we got patched up and fixed up and then we came back.

Karen Byrne: Came back to Hawaii?

Frank Belisle: Yeah.

Karen Byrne: So the next time you left Hawaii, when did you come back after that?

Frank Belisle: Oh...

Karen Byrne: Have you been back since you were here in the military?

Frank Belisle: No.

Karen Byrne: Is this the first time?

Frank Belisle: First time since.

Karen Byrne: First time.

Frank Belisle: I think '46 was the last time I was here.

Karen Byrne: Was the last time you were here.

Frank Belisle: I was still in. We were on uh... what they called magic carpet duty. We were taking a lot of the troops that were getting uh... discharged and sent back to the States, we would take- we would pick 'em up here at Pearl, load 'em up, take 'em to San Diego, come back and get another load, take 'em to San Diego and that's- that was our duty then.

Karen Byrne: Transport.

Jerry Green: I wanted to take you back to the attack for just a second. When the Maryland was hit by the bombs, what do you remember of that moment? Could you feel that?

Frank Belisle: Well, I- actually, there was so much noise from the bombs and the, like, the Oklahoma going every- over, we- we couldn't tell the difference. It was just steady booming, you know?

Jerry Green: Sure.

Karen Byrne: How does it feel to be back here at Pearl Harbor?

Frank Belisle: Well, it's nice.

Karen Byrne: Nearly 60 years later.

Frank Belisle: Yeah, nice.

Karen Byrne: It's a good experience.

Frank Belisle: Good experience, yeah. I enjoyed it.

Karen Byrne: And you- have you been out to the memorial yet?

Frank Belisle: Yeah. To the Arizona memorial, yeah.

Karen Byrne: You have been out there?

Frank Belisle: Yeah. Went out there two days ago.

Karen Byrne: How was that?

Frank Belisle: It was kind of touchy. Yeah. There were-- where we were, the Missouri is.

Karen Byrne: Right.

Frank Belisle: Where us and the Oklahoma was, the Missouri's there now.

Karen Byrne: When you were out there, did it bring back lots of memories?

Frank Belisle: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I had a- I had a friend that was on the Oklahoma that I went to school with but-- and he got off but he got killed in the water when they were...

Karen Byrne: Since you were at Pearl Harbor in 1941, have you had much chance to talk about your experiences here with other people?

Frank Belisle: Not that much. I was more a loner.

Karen Byrne: So this is one of the first times you've really talked about what happened to you?

Frank Belisle: Yeah, my son's been tryin' to get me for the last few years. But uh... like, today, I met three of the guys from the boiler room and we had quite a session. <laughs>

Jerry Green: Frank, I wanted to ask you, how long did it take for your family to get word about your circumstances after the attack?

Frank Belisle: Well, after the attack, I don't know how many days it was, probably two, probably three days, they gave us a postal card and, on there, it says I, you know, I am well, I am wounded, not seriously, and we had to check one item. I- I just put, I am well and letter will follow soon and we had

to sign our- our name and we couldn't put anything else on that envelope.
Matter of fact, I still have that envelope _____. I've still got it.

Karen Byrne: Do you know when they got- when they received that back home? Did it take a long time?

Frank Belisle: Oh, not that long. I think they got it about a week ago. I think they had clipper mail at that time here, which was- everything went by air which was pretty fast.

Karen Byrne: A week. That is fast.

Frank Belisle: Yeah. I would say a week probably.

Karen Byrne: What are you planning to do with that envelope?

Frank Belisle: I- I've still got it. My sons and grandsons.

Karen Byrne: Your grandsons have it?

Frank Belisle: Yeah. No, I- I still have it but they'll get it after me.

Karen Byrne: It'll go to your grandsons.

Frank Belisle: Yeah.

Karen Byrne: I see.

Frank Belisle: I got quite a bit of stuff that they'll get.

Karen Byrne: Is there anything else that you'd like to tell us about your experiences here on December 7th?

Frank Belisle: No, that's about it that I can recall right off hand.

Karen Byrne: And you're going out to the memorial tomorrow?

Frank Belisle: Oh, yeah. Mm hm. Yeah. It'll be a long day but it'll- it'll go.

Karen Byrne: We'd like to thank you very much for everything that you did in 1941 and for coming back 60 years later to help remind us about all this contribution that you and others like you made. So thank you very much.

Frank Belisle: Thank you. It's a pleasure.

End of Tape 425 Frank Belisle